July 20, 2009

'Urban slobber' over Chalk Creek

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Chalk Creek suffers from “urban slobber.”

The creek, which winds about 5 miles from the south flanks of Peavine Peak through the dense neighborhoods of northwest Reno to the Truckee River, is one of the region’s more polluted creeks. It contains dense concentrations of salts as well as nutrients that can cause blooms of algae growth.

Everyday practices — such as over-watering lawns, heavily fertilizing and washing cars on driveways — are big contributors to Chalk Creek’s problems, experts said.
“If we don’t look at the source, we’re never going to clean up that creek,” said Lynell Garfield, a hydrologist for the city of Reno. “We really want to encourage minimal watering, minimal fertilizer. Cut back on urban slobber.”

It’s an issue of concern to Reno, Sparks and Washoe County, which depend on the Truckee River for 80 percent of the public’s water supply. It’s an issue of concern to those trying to restore native fish to the river and others — including the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe — worried about the river’s water quality.

Studies into Chalk Creek were funded by a $250,000 grant from the Truckee River Fund, established by the Truckee Meadows Water Authority in 2004 to finance projects to protect or enhance water quality within the Truckee River’s watershed.
Two years of monitoring Chalk Creek’s water produced some “weird” results, Garfield said.

Among them: The creek is full of salts, measuring up to 3,000 milligrams per liter compared to 20 to 30 sometimes found in the river itself. Levels of phosphorus and nitrogen, which nourish algae, are also high.

“We’ve got this little creek that’s measuring super high in all of these,” Garfield said.
Northwest Reno resident Mike Adams isn’t surprised to hear of the creek’s troubles. He knows soil in the area is rocky and full of clay. And a lot of people in the area heavily fertilize their lawns and landscaping.

“Probably the only (flow) you see in the summer is runoff from the lawns. It’s the impact of thousands of homes,” said Adams, 35.
“With all the fertilizing going on in people’s yards, it’s got to go somewhere,” Adams said. “I see everybody watering whenever. I see that all the time.”
Experts have considered ways to treat Chalk Creek’s waters but concluded they were infeasible or too expensive, Garfield said.

There are plans to work with experts from the University of Nevada, Reno to establish a wetlands on the creek near Rainbow Ridge Park, a change that will help naturally filter pollutants.

But if the problem truly is to be successfully addressed, changes in the habits of the people living in the more than 3,500 homes in the area are needed, Garfield said.
A public outreach effort to encourage those changes begins next month, with officials urging reduced

watering, the use of car washes instead of driveway washing and consideration of dry landscaping rather than lawns.

Other steps, such as establishing landscape buffers between lawns and curbs, also can help reduce the scope of polluted urban runoff, Garfield said.

“We’re not in a position to tell people to get rid of their lawns, but there are things they can do,” Garfield said. “There is no slam-dunk solution. There is no silver bullet. We have a very complex situation.”

Additional Facts

Chalk Creek public outreach
o Effort funded by $250,000 grant from the Truckee River Fund.
o First public meeting on effort Aug. 20, Northwest Neighborhood Advisory Board, 6 p.m., McQueen Fire Station.
o For information on upcoming Chalk Creek educational presentations in your area, call 829-2810.
o To learn more: www.tmstormwater.com

URBAN SLOBBER
It’s polluted water run-off from an urban environment into a nearby water system:
o The rinse from car washing in driveways
o Water run-off from lawns containing fertilizer and other chemicals
o Chemical spills
